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Hegel, Death and Sacrifice¹

The animal dies. But the death of the animal is the becoming of consciousness.

I. DEATH

Man's Negativity

In the *Lectures* of 1805–1806, at the moment of his thought's full maturity, during the period when he was writing *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel expressed in these terms the black character of humanity:

"Man is that night, that empty Nothingness, which contains everything in its undivided simplicity: the wealth of an infinite number of representations, of images, not one of which comes precisely to mind, or which [moreover], are not [there] insofar as they are really present. It is the night, the interiority—or—the intimacy of Nature which exists here: [the] pure personal-Ego. In phantasmagorical representations it is night on all sides: here suddenly surges up a blood-spattered head; there, another, white, apparition; and they disappear just as abruptly. That is the night that one perceives if one looks a man in the eyes: then one is delving into a night which becomes terrible; it is the night of the world which then presents itself to us."²

1. Excerpt from a study on the—fundamentally Hegelian—thought of Alexander Kojève. This thought seeks, so far as possible, to be Hegel's thought, such a contemporary spirit, knowing what Hegel did not know (knowing, for example, the events that have occurred since 1917 and, as well, the philosophy of Heidegger), could grasp it and develop it. Alexander Kojève's originality and courage, it must be said, is to have perceived the impossibility of going any further, the necessity, consequently, of renouncing the creation of an original philosophy and, thereby, the interminable starting-over which is the avowal of the vanity of thought. This essay was first published in *Deucalion* 5 (1955). With permission of Editions Gallimard © 1988.

2. G. W. F. Hegel, *Jenenser Philosophie des Geistes* in *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Johannes Hoffmeister, (Leipzig: Felix Meiner, 1931), vol. 20 180–81. Cited by Kojève in

Of course, this "beautiful text," where Hegel's Romanticism finds expression, is not to be understood loosely. If Hegel was a romantic, it was perhaps in a *fundamental* manner (he was at any rate a romantic at the beginning—in his youth—, when he was a commonplace revolutionary), but he did not see in Romanticism the method by which a proud spirit deems itself capable of subordinating the real world to the arbitrariness of its own dreams. Alexander Kojève, in citing them, says of these lines that they express "the central and final idea of Hegelian philosophy," which is "the idea that the foundation and the source of human objective reality (*Wirklichkeit*) and empirical existence (*Dasein*) are the Nothingness which manifests itself as negative or creative Action, free and self-conscious."

To permit access to Hegel's disconcerting world, I have felt obliged to mark, by a careful examination, both its violent contrasts and its ultimate unity.

For Kojève, "the 'dialectical' or anthropological philosophy of Hegel is in the final analysis a *philosophy of death* (or, which is the same thing, of atheism)" (K, 537; TEL, 539).

But if man is "death living a human life" (K, 548; TEL, 550), man's negativity, given in death by virtue of the fact that man's death is essentially voluntary (resulting from risks assumed without necessity, without biological reasons), is nevertheless the principle of action. Indeed, for Hegel, Action is Negativity, and Negativity Action. On the one hand, the man who negates Nature—by introducing into it, like a flip-side, the anomaly of a "pure, personal ego"—is present within that Nature's heart like a night within light, like an intimacy within the exteriority of those things which are *in themselves*—like a phantasmagoria in which nothing takes shape but to evanesce, nothing appears but to disappear, where nothing exists except absorbed without respite in the *annihilation* of time, from which it draws the beauty of a dream. But there is a complementary aspect: this negation of Nature is not merely given in consciousness—where that which exists *in itself* appears (but only to disappear)—; this negation is exteriorized, and in being exteriorized, really (*in itself*) changes the reality of Nature. Man works and fights; he transforms the given; he transforms Nature and in destroying it he creates a

world, a world which was not. On the one hand there is poetry, the destruction that has surged up and diluted itself, a *blood-spattered* head; on the other hand there is Action, work, struggle. On the one hand, "pure Nothingness," where man "differs from Nothingness only for a certain time" (K, 573; TEL, 575). On the other, a historical World, where man's Negativity, that Nothingness that gnaws him from within, creates the whole of concrete reality (at once object and subject, real world changed or unchanged, man who thinks and changes the world).

*Hegel's Philosophy is a Philosophy of Death—or of Atheism*³

The essential—and the original—characteristic of Hegelian philosophy is to describe the totality of what is; and, consequently, at the same time that it accounts for everything which appears before our eyes, to give an integrated account of the thought and language which express—and reveal—that appearance.

"In my opinion," says Hegel, "Everything depends on one's expressing and understanding Truth not (only) as substance, but also as subject."⁴

3. In this paragraph, and the following, I repeat in a different form what has been said by Alexander Kojève. But not only in a different form; essentially I have to develop the second part of that sentence, which is, at first glance, difficult to comprehend in its concrete aspect: "The being or the annihilation of the 'Subject' is the temporalizing annihilation of Being, which must be *before* the annihilated being: the being of the 'Subject' necessarily has, therefore, a beginning. And being the (temporal) annihilation of the nothingness in Being, being nothingness which nihilates (insofar as Time), the "Subject" is essentially negation of itself: therefore it has an end." In particular, I have followed for this (as I have already done in the preceding paragraph) the part of *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* which concerns parts 2 and 3 of the present study, i.e., Appendix II, "The Idea of Death in the Philosophy of Hegel," Kojève, 527–73. (TEL, 529–75.) [Translator's note: This appendix, from which all of Bataille's references to Kojève are taken, remains untranslated in English; it is not included in Allan Bloom's reedition (and abridgment) of Kojève's *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (New York: Basic Books, 1969).]

4. Cf., G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 9–10. In his footnotes, Bataille attributes the French versions he uses of Hegel to Jean Hyppolite's translation of *The Phenomenology of Spirit* and often also cites the pages from *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel* where Alexandre Kojève quotes the same passages. However, Kojève's version differs from that of Hyppolite and Bataille's from both. It is the latter that I have translated. Page references will hereafter be given to the English translation by A. V. Miller, which is often at significant variance with the quotations as I have rendered them. [Translator's note.]

In other words, natural knowledge is incomplete, it does not and cannot envisage any but abstract entities, isolated from a whole, from an indissoluble totality, which alone is concrete. Knowledge must at the same time be anthropological: "in addition to the ontological bases of natural reality," Kojève writes, "[knowledge] must find those of human reality, which alone is capable of being revealed through Discourse" (K, 528; TEL, 530). Of course, this anthropology does not envisage Man as do the modern sciences but as a movement impossible to isolate from the heart of the totality. In a sense, it is actually a theology, where man has taken the place of God.

But for Hegel, the human reality which he places at the heart, and center, of the totality is very different from that of Greek philosophy. His anthropology is that of the Judeo-Christian tradition, which emphasizes Man's *liberty*, *historicity*, and *individuality*. Like Judeo-Christian man, the Hegelian man is a spiritual (i.e., "dialectical") being. Yet, for the Judeo-Christian world, "spirituality" is fully realized and manifest only in the hereafter, and Spirit properly speaking, truly "objectively real" Spirit, is God: "an infinite and eternal being." According to Hegel, the "spiritual" or "dialectical" being is "necessarily *temporal* and finite." This means that death alone assures the existence of a "spiritual" or "dialectical" being, in the Hegelian sense. If the animal which constitutes man's natural being did not die, and—what is more—if death did not dwell in him as the source of his anguish—and all the more so in that he seeks it out, desires it and sometimes freely chooses it—there would be no man or liberty, no history or individual. In other words, if he revels in what nonetheless frightens him, if he is the being, identical with himself, who risks (identical) being itself, then man is truly a Man: he separates himself from the animal. Henceforth he is no longer, like a stone, an immutable given, he bears within him *Negativity*; and the force, the violence of negativity cast him into the incessant movement of history, which changes him and which alone realizes the totality of the concrete real through time. Only history has the power to finish what is, to finish it in the passage of time. And so the idea of an eternal and immutable God is in this perspective merely a provisional end, which survives while awaiting something better. Only completed history and the spirit of the Sage (of Hegel)—in whom history revealed, then revealed in full, the development of being and the totality of its becoming—occupy a sovereign position, which God only provisionally occupies, as a regent.

The Tragi-Comic Aspect of Man's Divinity

This way of seeing things can with justice be considered comic. Besides, Hegel never expressed it explicitly. The texts where it is *implicitly* affirmed are ambiguous, and their extreme difficulty ultimately kept them from full consideration. Kojève himself is circumspect. He does not dwell on them and avoids drawing precise conclusions. In order to express appropriately the situation Hegel got himself into, no doubt involuntarily, one would need the tone, or at least, in a restrained form, the horror of tragedy. But things would quickly take on a comic appearance.

Be that as it may, to pass through death is so absent from the divine figure that a myth situated in the tradition associated death, and the agony of death, with the eternal and unique God of the Judeo-Christian sphere. The death of Jesus partakes of comedy to the extent that one cannot unarbitrarily introduce the forgetting of his eternal divinity—which is his—into the consciousness of an omnipotent and infinite God. Before Hegel's "absolute knowledge," the Christian myth was already based precisely on the fact that nothing divine is possible (in the pre-Christian sense of *sacred*) which is finite. But the vague consciousness in which the (Christian) myth of the death of God took form differed, nonetheless, from that of Hegel: in order to misrepresent a figure of God that limited the infinite as the totality, it was possible to add on, in contradiction with its basis, a movement toward the finite.

Hegel was able—and it was necessary for him—to add up the sum (the Totality) of the movements which were produced in history. But humor, it seems, is incompatible with work and its necessary assiduity. I shall return to this subject; I have merely, for the moment, shuffled cards. . . . It is difficult to pass from a humanity humiliated by divine grandeur to that . . . of the apotheosized and sovereign Sage, his pride swollen with human vanity.

A Fundamental Text

In what I have written up to this point, only one necessity emerges in a precise fashion: there can be authentic Wisdom (absolute Wisdom, or in general anything approaching it) only if the Sage raises himself, if I can put it this way, to the height of death, at whatever anguish to him.

A passage from the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*⁵ forcefully expresses the necessity of such an attitude. There is no doubt from the start of the "capital importance" of this admirable text, not only for an understanding of Hegel, but in all regards.

"Death," writes Hegel, "—if we wish so to name that unreality—is the most terrible thing there is and to uphold the work of death is the task which demands the greatest strength. Impotent beauty hates this awareness, because understanding makes this demand of beauty, a requirement which beauty cannot fulfill. Now, the life of Spirit is not that life which is frightened of death, and spares itself destruction, but that life which assumes death and lives with it. Spirit attains its truth only by finding itself in absolute dismemberment. It is not that (prodigious) power by being the Positive that turns away from the Negative, as when we say of something: this is nothing or (this is) false and, having (thus) disposed of it, pass from there to something else; no, Spirit is that power only to the degree in which it contemplates the Negative face to face (and) dwells with it. This prolonged sojourn is the magical force which transposes the negative into given-Being."

The Human Negation of Nature and of the Natural Being of Man

In principle, I ought to have started the passage just cited at an earlier point. I did not want to weigh this text down by giving the "enigmatic" lines which precede it. But I shall sketch out the sense of the omitted lines by restating Kojève's interpretation, without which the consequences, in spite of an appearance of relative clarity, would remain closed to us.

For Hegel, it is both fundamental and altogether worthy of astonishment that human understanding (that is, language, discourse) should have had the force (an incomparable force) to separate its constitutive elements from the Totality. These elements (this tree,

5. Cf., Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller, 19. Cited by Kojève, 538–39. [TEL, 540–41.] Kojève, Hyppolite, and Bataille all translate the German "Zer-rissenheit" by "déchirement," which I in turn have given as "dismemberment," the same word which appears in Miller's translation of Hegel. It is important to note that the word "déchirement" has the meanings of "shredding" and "tearing" and, unlike "dismemberment," does not imply a disarticulation into predetermined units. In *L'Expérience intérieure*, for example, Bataille speaks of himself as left in "lambeaux" (shreds, as of cloth or paper) which his "inability to respond *achevait de . . . déchirer*," (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), 19. [Translator's note.]

this bird, this stone) are in fact inseparable from the whole. They are "bound together by spatial and temporal, indeed material, bonds which are indissoluble." Their separation implies the human Negativity toward Nature of which I spoke, without pointing out its decisive consequences. For the man who negates nature could not in any way live outside of it. He is not merely a man who negates Nature, he is first of all an animal, that is to say the very thing he negates: he cannot therefore negate Nature without negating himself. The intrinsic totality of man is reflected in Kojève's bizarre expression, that totality is first of all Nature (natural being), it is "the anthropomorphic animal" (Nature, the animal indissolubly linked to the whole of Nature, and which supports Man). Thus human Negativity, Man's effective desire to negate Nature in destroying it—in reducing it to his own ends, as when, for example, he makes a tool of it (and the tool will be the model of an object isolated from Nature)—cannot stop at Man himself; insofar as he is Nature, Man is exposed to his own Negativity. To negate Nature is to negate the animal which props up Man's Negativity. It is undoubtedly not the understanding, breaker of Nature's unity, which seeks man's death, and yet the separating Action of the understanding implies the monstrous energy of thought, of the "pure abstract I," which is essentially opposed to fusion, to the inseparable character of the elements—constitutive of the whole—which firmly upholds their separation.

It is the very separation of Man's being, it is his isolation from Nature, and, consequently, his isolation in the midst of his own kind, which condemn him to disappear definitively. The animal, negating nothing, lost in a global animality to which it offers no opposition—just as that animality is itself lost in Nature (and in the totality of all that is)—does not truly disappear. . . . No doubt the individual fly dies, but today's flies are the same as those of last year. Last year's have died? . . . Perhaps, but *nothing* has disappeared. The flies remain, equal to themselves like the waves of the sea. This seems contrived: a biologist can separate a fly from the swarm, all it takes is a brushstroke. But he separates it *for himself*, he does not separate it for the flies. To separate itself from the others a fly would need the monstrous force of the understanding; then it would name itself and do what the understanding normally effects by means of language, which alone founds the separation of elements and by founding it founds itself on it, within a world formed of separated and denominated entities. But in this game the human animal finds death; it

finds precisely human death, the only one which frightens, which freezes—but which only frightens and transfixes the man who is absorbed in his future disappearance, to the extent that he is a separated and irreplaceable being. The only true death supposes separation and, through the discourse which separates, the consciousness of being separated.

“Impotent Beauty Hates the Understanding”

Up to this point, Hegel's text presents a *simple* and *common* truth, but one enunciated in a philosophical manner which is, properly speaking, sibylline. In the passage from the Preface cited above, Hegel, on the contrary, affirms and describes a *personal* moment of violence—Hegel, in other words the Sage, to whom an absolute Knowledge has conferred definitive satisfaction. This is not an unbridled violence. What Hegel unleashes here is not the violence of Nature, it is the energy, or the violence, of the Understanding—the Negativity of the Understanding—opposing itself to the pure beauty of the dream, which cannot act, which is impotent.

Indeed, the beauty of the dream is on that side of the world where nothing is yet separated from what surrounds it, where each element, in contrast to the abstract objects of the Understanding, is given concretely, in space and time. But beauty cannot *act*. It can only be and preserve itself. Through action it would no longer exist, since action would first destroy what beauty is: beauty, which seeks nothing, which is, which refuses to move itself but which is disturbed by the force of the Understanding. Moreover, beauty does not have the power to respond to the request of the Understanding, which asks it to uphold and preserve the work of *human* death. Beauty is incapable of it, in the sense that to uphold that work, it would be engaged in Action. Beauty is sovereign, it is an end, or it is not: that is why it is not susceptible to acting, why it is, even in principle, powerless and why it cannot yield to the active negation of the Understanding, which changes the world and itself becomes other than it is.⁶

6. Here my interpretation differs slightly from Kojève's (146 [TEL, 148]). [Translator's note: this passage too is missing from Bloom's abridgment of Kojève, which starts only with the lectures given in 1937–38. (The passage in question is from the 1936–37 lectures.)] Kojève simply states that “impotent beauty is incapable of bending to the requirements of the Understanding. The esthete, the romantic, the mystic, flee the idea of death and speak of Nothingness itself as something which *is*.” In particular, he admirably describes the mystic in this way. But the same ambiguity is found in

This beauty without consciousness of itself *cannot therefore* really—but not for the same reason as life, which “recoils in horror from death and wants to save itself from annihilation”—bear death and preserve itself in it. This impotent beauty at least suffers from feeling the breakup of the profoundly indissoluble Totality of what is (of the concrete-real). Beauty would like to remain the sign of an accord of the real with itself. It cannot become conscious Negativity, awakened in dismemberment, and the lucid gaze, absorbed in the Negative. This latter attitude presupposes the violent and laborious struggle of Man against Nature and is its end. That is the historic struggle where Man constitutes himself as “Subject” or as “abstract I” of the “Understanding,” as a separated and named being.

“That is to say,” Kojève clarifies, “that thought and the discourse which reveals the real are born of the negative Action which actualizes Nothingness by annihilating Being: the given being of Man (in the Struggle) and the given being of Nature (through Work—which results, moreover, from the real contact with death in the Struggle.) That is to say, therefore, that the human being himself is none other than that Action: he is death which lives a human life” (K, 548; TEL, 550).

I want to insist on the continual connection between an abyssal aspect and a tough, down-to-earth aspect in this philosophy, the only one having the ambition to be complete. The divergent possibilities of opposed human figures confront each other and assemble in it: the figure of the dying man and of the proud one, who turns from death, the figure of the master and that of the man pinned to his work, the figure of the revolutionary and that of the skeptic, whose egotistical interest limits desire. This philosophy is not only a philosophy of death. It is also one of class struggle and work.

But within the limits of this study I do not intend to envisage this other side. I would like to compare that Hegelian doctrine of death with what we know about “sacrifice.”

philosophers (in Hegel, in Heidegger), at least ultimately. In truth, Kojève seems to me wrong not to have envisaged, beyond classical mysticism, a “conscious mysticism,” conscious of making a Being from Nothingness, and, in addition, defining that impasse as a Negativity which would no longer have a field of action (at the end of history). The atheistic mystic, *self-conscious*, conscious of having to die and to disappear, would live, as Hegel obviously said concerning himself, “in absolute dismemberment”; but, for him, it is only the matter of a certain period: unlike Hegel, he would never come out of it, “contemplating the Negative right in the face,” but never being able to transpose it into Being, refusing to do it and maintaining himself in ambiguity.

II. SACRIFICE

*Sacrifice, on the one hand, and on the other, the Gaze of Hegel
Absorbed in Death and Sacrifice*

I shall not speak of the interpretation of sacrifice which Hegel gives in the chapter of the *Phenomenology* devoted to Religion.⁷ It no doubt makes sense in the development of the chapter, but it strays from the essential and, from the point of view of the theory of sacrifice, it is, in my opinion, of less interest than the implicit representation which is given in the text of the Preface and which I shall continue to analyze.

Concerning sacrifice, I can essentially say that, on the level of Hegel's philosophy, Man has, in a sense, revealed and founded human truth by sacrificing; in sacrifice he destroyed the animal⁸ in himself, allowing himself and the animal to survive only as that noncorporeal truth which Hegel describes and which makes of man—in Heidegger's words—a being unto death (*Sein zum Tode*), or—in the words of Kojève himself—"death which lives a human life."

Actually, the problem of Hegel is given in the action of sacrifice. In sacrifice, death, on the one hand, essentially strikes the corporeal being; and on the other hand, it is precisely in sacrifice that "death lives a *human* life." It should even be said that sacrifice is the precise response to Hegel's requirement, the original formulation of which I repeat:

"Spirit attains its truth only by finding itself in absolute dismemberment. It does not attain that (prodigious) power by being the Positive that turns away from the Negative . . . no, Spirit is that power only in the degree to which it contemplates the Negative face to face [and] dwells with it . . ."

If one takes into account the fact that the institution of sacrifice is practically universal, it is clear that Negativity, incarnated in Man's death, not only is the arbitrary construction of Hegel, but also that it has played a role in the spirit of the simplest men, without any com-

7. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, chapter 8: Religion, B.: Religion in the form of Art, a) The abstract work of art (434–35). In these two pages, Hegel dwells on the disappearance of *objective essence*, but without developing its consequences. On the second page Hegel limits himself to considerations proper to "aesthetic religion" (the religion of the Greeks).

8. Still, although animal sacrifice seems to predate human sacrifice, there is nothing to prove that the choice of an animal signifies the unconscious desire to oppose the animal as such; man is only opposed to corporeal being, the being that is given. He is, furthermore, just as opposed to the plant.

mon grounds comparable to those which are regulated once and for all by the ceremonies of a Church—but nonetheless in a univocal manner. It is striking to see that across the world a communal *Negativity* has maintained a strict parallelism in the development of rather stable institutions, which have the same form and the same effects.

Whether He Lives or Dies, Man Cannot Immediately Know Death

I shall speak later of the profound differences between the man of sacrifice, acting in ignorance (unconscious) of the full scope of what he is doing, and the Sage (Hegel) surrendering to the implications of a Knowledge which, in his own eyes, is absolute.

Despite these differences, the question of manifesting the Negative still remains (and still under a concrete form, i.e., at the heart of the Totality, whose constitutive elements are inseparable). The privileged manifestation of Negativity is death, but death, in fact, reveals nothing. In theory, it is his natural, animal being whose death reveals Man to himself, but the revelation never takes place. For when the animal being supporting him dies, the human being himself ceases to be. In order for Man to reveal himself ultimately to himself, he would have to die, but he would have to do it while living—watching himself ceasing to be. In other words, death itself would have to become (self-) consciousness at the very moment that it annihilates the conscious being. In a sense, this is what takes place (what at least is on the point of taking place, or which takes place in a fugitive, ungraspable manner) by means of a subterfuge. In the sacrifice, the sacrificer identifies himself with the animal that is struck down dead. And so he dies in seeing himself die, and even, in a certain way, by his own will, one in spirit with the sacrificial weapon. But it is a comedy!

At least it would be a comedy if some other method existed which could reveal to the living the invasion of death: that finishing off of the finite being, which *his* Negativity—which kills him, *ends* him and definitively suppresses him—accomplishes alone and which it alone can accomplish. For Hegel, *satisfaction* can only take place, desire can be appeased only in the consciousness of death. If it were based on the exclusion of death, satisfaction would contradict that which death designates, if the satisfied being who is not conscious, not utterly conscious, of what in a constitutive manner he is, i.e., mortal, were eventually to be driven from satisfaction by death. That

is why the consciousness that he has of *himself* must reflect (must mirror) the movement of negativity which creates him, which makes a man of him for the very reason that it will one day kill him.

He will be killed by his own negativity, but for him, thereafter, there will be nothing left; his is a creative death, but if the consciousness of death—of the marvelous magic of death—does not touch him before he dies, during his life it will seem that death is not destined to reach him, and so the death awaiting him will not give him a *human* character. Thus, at all costs, man must live at the moment that he really dies, or he must live with the impression of really dying.

Knowledge of Death Cannot Do Without a Subterfuge: Spectacle

This difficulty proclaims the necessity of *spectacle*, or of *representation* in general, without the practice of which it would be possible for us to remain alien and ignorant in respect to death, just as beasts apparently are. Indeed, nothing is less animal than fiction, which is more or less separated from the real, from death.

Man does not live by bread alone, but also by the comedies with which he willingly deceives himself. In Man it is the animal, it is the natural being, which eats. But Man takes part in rites and performances. Or else he can read: to the extent that it is sovereign—authentic—, literature prolongs in him the haunting magic of performances, tragic or comic.

In tragedy,⁹ at least, it is a question of our identifying with some character who dies, and of believing that we die, although we are alive. Furthermore, pure and simple imagination suffices, but it has the same meaning as the classic subterfuges, performances, or books, to which the masses have recourse.

Agreement and Disagreement between Naive Behaviors and Hegel's Lucid Reaction

By associating it with sacrifice and, thereby, with the primary theme of *representation* (in art, in festivals, in performances), I have sought to demonstrate that Hegel's reaction is fundamental human behavior. It is not a fantasy or a strange attitude, it is *par excellence* the

9. I discuss comedy further on.

expression endlessly repeated by tradition. It is not Hegel alone, it is all of humanity which everywhere always sought, obliquely, to seize what death both gave and took away from humanity.

Between Hegel and the man of sacrifice there nevertheless remains a profound difference. Hegel was *conscious* of his representation of the Negative: he situated it, lucidly, in a definite point of the "coherent discourse" which revealed him to himself. That Totality included the discourse which reveals it. The man of sacrifice, who lacked a discursive consciousness of what he did, had only a "sensual" awareness, i.e., an obscure one, reduced to an unintelligible emotion. It is true that Hegel himself, beyond discourse, and in spite of himself (in an "absolute dismemberment,") received the shock of death even more violently. More violently, above all, for the primary reason that the broad movement of discourse extended its reach beyond limits, i.e., within the framework of the Totality of the real. Beyond the slightest doubt, for Hegel, the fact that he was still alive was simply an aggravation. The man of sacrifice, on the other hand, maintains his life essentially. He maintains it not only in the sense that life is necessary for the representation of death, but [also in the sense that] he seeks to *enrich* it. But from an external perspective, the palpable and *intentional* excitement of sacrifice was of greater interest than the *involuntary* sensitivity of Hegel. The excitement of which I speak is well-known, is definable; it is *sacred* horror: the richest and the most agonizing experience, which does not limit itself to dismemberment but which, on the contrary, opens itself, like a theatre curtain, onto a realm beyond this world, where the rising light of day transfigures all things and destroys their limited meaning.

Indeed, if Hegel's attitude opposes learned consciousness and the limitless organization of a discursive thinking to the naiveté of sacrifice, still that consciousness and that organization remain unclear on one point; one cannot say that Hegel was unaware of the "moment" of sacrifice; this "moment" is included, implicated in the whole movement of the *Phenomenology*—where it is the Negativity of death, insofar as it is assumed, which makes a man of the human animal. But because he did not see that sacrifice in itself bore witness to the *entire* movement of death,¹⁰ the final experience—the one

10. Perhaps for lack of a Catholic religious experience. I imagine Catholicism closer to pagan experience; I mean to a universal religious experience from which the Reformation distanced itself. Perhaps a profound Catholic piety could alone have introduced the inward sense without which the phenomenology of sacrifice would be im-

peculiar to the Sage—described in the Preface to the *Phenomenology* was at first *initial* and *universal*—he did not know to what extent he was right—with what precision he described the intimate movement of Negativity; he did not clearly separate death from the feeling of sadness to which naive experience opposes a sort of shunting yard of the emotions.

Pleasure and the Sadness of Death

It was precisely the univocal character of death for Hegel that inspired the following commentary from Kojève, which applies, again, to the passage from the Preface: (K, 549; TEL, 551). “Certainly, the idea of death does not heighten the *well-being* of Man; it does not make him *happy* nor does it give him any pleasure.” Kojève wondered in what way satisfaction results from a familiarity with the Negative, from a *tête-à-tête* with death. He believed it his duty, out of decency, to reject vulgar satisfaction. The fact that Hegel himself said, in this respect, that Spirit “only attains its truth by finding itself in absolute dismemberment” goes together, in principle, with Kojève’s Negation. Consequently, it would even be superfluous to insist. . . . Kojève simply states that the idea of death “is alone capable of satisfying man’s pride.” . . . Indeed, the desire to be “recognized,” which Hegel places at the origin of historical struggles, could be expressed in an intrepid attitude, of the sort that shows a character to its best advantage. “It is only,” says Kojève, “in being or in becoming aware of one’s mortality or finitude, in existing and in feeling one’s existence in a universe without a beyond or without a God, that Man can affirm his liberty, his historicity and his individuality— unique in all the world —and

possible. Modern knowledge, much more extensive than that of Hegel’s time, has assuredly contributed to the solution of that fundamental enigma (why, without any plausible reason, *has humanity in general* “sacrificed”?), but I seriously believe that a correct phenomenological description could only be based on at least a Catholic period.

—But at any rate, Hegel, hostile to *being* which does nothing,—to what simply *is*, and is not *Action*,—was more interested in military death; it is through such death that he perceived the theme of sacrifice (but he himself uses the word in a moral sense): “The state-of-the-soldier,” he states in his *Lectures* of 1805–06, “and war are the objectively real sacrifice of the personal-I, the danger of death for the particular,—that contemplation of his abstract immediate Negativity . . .” (in Hegel, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 20, 261–62. Cited by Kojève in *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 558 [TEL, 560]). Nonetheless, religious sacrifice has, even from Hegel’s point of view, an essential signification.

have them be recognized. (Ibid.). But if Kojève sets aside vulgar satisfaction—happiness—he now also sets aside Hegel's "absolute dismemberment": indeed, such dismemberment is not easily reconciled with the desire for recognition.

Satisfaction and dismemberment coincide, however, in one point, but here they harmonize with *pleasure*. This coincidence takes place in "sacrifice"; it is generally understood as the *naïve form of life*, as every existence in present time, which manifests what Man *is*: the novelty which he signifies in the world after he has become *Man*, on the condition that he has satisfied his "*animal*" needs.

At any rate, *pleasure*, or at least sensual pleasure, is such that in respect to it Kojève's affirmation would be difficult to uphold: the idea of death helps, in a certain manner and in certain cases, to multiply the pleasures of the senses. I go so far as to believe that, under the form of defilement, the world (or rather the general imagery) of death is at the base of erotism. The feeling of sin is connected in lucid consciousness to the idea of death, and *in the same manner* the feeling of sin is connected with pleasure.¹¹ There is in fact no *human* pleasure without some irregularity in its circumstances, without the breaking of an interdiction—the simplest, and the most powerful of which, is currently that of nudity.

Moreover, possession was associated in its time with the image of sacrifice; it was a sacrifice in which woman was the victim. . . . That association from ancient poetry is very meaningful; it refers back to a precise state of sensibility in which the sacrificial element, the feeling of sacred horror itself, joined, in a weakened state, to a tempered pleasure; in which, too, the taste for sacrifice and the emotion which it released seemed in no way contrary to the ultimate uses of pleasure.

It must be said too that sacrifice, like tragedy, was an element of a celebration; it bespoke a blind, pernicious joy and all the danger of that joy, and yet this is precisely the principle of *human joy*; it wears out and threatens with death all who get caught up in its movement.

Gay Anguish, Anguished Gaiety

To the association of death and pleasure, which is not a given, at least is not an immediate given in consciousness, is obviously opposed the

11. This is at least possible and, if it is a matter of the most common interdictions, banal.

sadness of death, always in the background of consciousness. In principle, *consciously*, humanity “recoils in horror before death.” In principle, the destructive effects of Negativity have Nature as their object. But for Man’s Negativity to drive him into a confrontation with danger, for him to make of himself, or at least of the animal, of the natural being that he is, the object of his destructive negation, the banal prerequisite is his unconsciousness of the cause and the effects of his actions. Now, it was essential for Hegel to *gain consciousness* of Negativity as such, to capture its horror—here the horror of death—by upholding and by looking the work of death right in the face.

Hegel, in this way, is less opposed to those who “recoil” than to those who say: “it is nothing.” He seems to distance himself most from those who react with gaiety.

I want to emphasize, as clearly as possible, after their similarity, the opposition between the naive attitude and that of the—*absolute*—Wisdom of Hegel. I am not sure, in fact, that of the two attitudes the more naive is the less *absolute*.

I shall cite a paradoxical example of a gay reaction in the face of the work of death.

The Irish and Welsh custom of the “wake” is little known but was still practiced at the end of the last century. It is the subject of Joyce’s last work,¹² *Finnegans Wake*—the deathwatch of Finnegun (however, the reading of this famous novel is difficult at best). In Wales, the coffin was placed *open*, standing at the place of honor of the house. The dead man would be dressed in his finest suit and top hat. His family would invite all of his friends, who honored the departed all the more the longer they danced and the deeper they drank to his health. It is the death of an *other*, but in such instances, the death of the other is always the image of one’s own death. Only under one condition could anyone so rejoice; with the presumed agreement of the dead man—who is an other—, the dead man that the drinker in his turn will become shall have no other meaning than his predecessor.

This paradoxical reaction could be considered a response to the desire to deny *the existence of death*. A logical desire? Not in the least, I think. In Mexico today, death is commonly envisaged on the same level as the amusements that can be found at festivals:

12. On the subject of this obscure book, *vide* E. Jolas, “Elucidation du monomythe de James Joyce” in *Critique* (July 1948): 579–95.

skeleton puppets, skeleton candies, skeleton merry-go-rounds—but this custom is associated with an intense cult of the dead, a visible obsession with death.¹³

If I envisage death gaily, it is not that I too say, in turning away from what is frightening: “it is nothing” or “it is false.” On the contrary, gaiety, connected with the work of death, causes me anguish, is accentuated by my anguish, and in return exacerbates that anguish: ultimately, gay anguish, anguished gaiety cause me, in a feverish chill,¹⁴ “absolute dismemberment,” where it is my joy that finally tears me apart, but where dejection would follow joy were I not torn all the way to the end, immeasurably.

There is one precise opposition that I would like to bring out fully: on the one hand Hegel’s attitude is less whole than that of naive humanity, but this is meaningless unless, reciprocally, one sees that the naive attitude is powerless to maintain itself without subterfuge.

Discourse Gives Useful Ends to Sacrifice “Afterwards.”

I have linked the meaning of sacrifice to Man’s behavior once his animal needs have been satisfied: Man differs from the natural being which he also is; the sacrificial gesture is what he humanly is, and the spectacle of sacrifice then makes his humanity manifest. Freed from animal need, man is sovereign: he does what he pleases—his pleasure. Under these conditions he is finally able to make a rigorously autonomous gesture. So long as he needed to satisfy animal needs, he had to act with an end in view (he had to secure food, protect himself from the cold). This supposes a servitude, a series of acts subordinated to a final result: the natural, animal satisfaction without which Man properly speaking, sovereign Man, could not subsist. But Man’s intelligence, his *discursive thought*, developed as functions of servile labor. Only sacred, poetic words, limited to the level of impotent beauty, have retained the power to manifest full sovereignty. Sacrifice, consequently, is a *sovereign, autonomous* manner of being only to the extent that it is uninformed by *meaningful* discourse. To the extent that discourse informs it, what is *sovereign* is given in terms of

13. This came out in the documentary which Eisenstein drew from his work for a long film: *¡Viva Mexico!* The crux of this film dealt with the bizarre practices which I have discussed.

14. Reading “chaud et froid” for “chaud-froid,” which means a dish prepared hot but served cold.

servitude. Indeed by definition what is *sovereign* does not *serve*. But simple discourse must respond to the question that discursive thought asks concerning the meaning that each thing must have on the level of utility. In principle, each thing is there to *serve* some purpose or other. Thus the simple manifestation of Man's link to annihilation, the pure revelation of Man to himself (at the moment when death transfixes his attention) passes from sovereignty to the primacy of servile ends. Myth, associated with ritual, had at first the impotent beauty of poetry, but discourse concerning sacrifice slipped into vulgar, self-serving interpretation. Starting with effects naively imagined on the level of poetry, such as the appeasing of a god or the purity of beings, the end of meaningful discourse became the abundance of rain or the city's well-being. The substantial work of Frazer, who recalls those forms of sovereignty that were the most *impotent* and, apparently, the least propitious for happiness, generally tends to reduce the meaning of the ritual act to the same purposes as labor in the fields, and to make of sacrifice an agrarian rite. Today that thesis of the *Golden Bough* is discredited, but it seemed reasonable insofar as the same people who sacrificed inscribed sovereign sacrifice within the frame of a language of plowmen. It is true that in a very arbitrary manner, which never merited the credence of rigorous reason, these people attempted, and must have labored to submit sacrifice to the laws of action, laws to which they themselves were submitted, or labored to submit themselves.

*Impotence of the Sage to Attain Sovereignty on the Basis
of Discourse*

Thus, the sovereignty of sacrifice is not absolute either. It is not absolute to the extent that the institution maintains within the world of efficacious activity a form whose meaning is, on the contrary, sovereign. A slippage cannot fail to occur, to the benefit of *servitude*.

If the attitude of the Sage (Hegel) is not, for its part, sovereign, at least things function in the opposite direction; Hegel did not distance himself and if he was unable to find authentic sovereignty, he came as near to it as he could. What separated him from it would even be imperceptible were we not able to glimpse a richer image through these alterations of meaning, which touch on sacrifice and which have reduced it from an *end* to a simple *means*. The key to a lesser

rigorousness on the part of the Sage is the fact, not that discourse engages his sovereignty within a frame that cannot suit him and which atrophies it, but precisely the opposite: sovereignty in Hegel's attitude proceeds from a movement which *discourse* reveals and which, in the Sage's spirit, is never separated from its revelation. It can never, therefore, be fully *sovereign*; the Sage, in fact, cannot fail to subordinate it to the goal of a Wisdom which supposes the completion of discourse. Wisdom alone *will be* full autonomy, the sovereignty of being. . . . At least it *would be* if we could find sovereignty by searching for it: and, in fact, if I search for it, I am undertaking the project of being-sovereignly: but the *project* of being-sovereignly presupposes a servile being! What nonetheless assures the sovereignty of the moment described is the "absolute dismemberment" of which Hegel speaks, the rupture, for a time, of discourse. But that rupture itself is not sovereign. In a sense it is an accident in the ascent. Although the two sovereignties, the naive and the sage ones, are both sovereignties of death, beyond the difference between a decline at birth (between a gradual alteration and an imperfect manifestation), they differ on yet another precise point: on Hegel's part, it is precisely a question of an accident. It is not a stroke of fate, a piece of bad luck, which would be forever deprived of sense. Dismemberment is, on the contrary, full of meaning. ("*Spirit only attains its truth,*" writes Hegel (but it is my emphasis), "by finding itself in absolute dismemberment.") But this meaning is unfortunate. It is what limited and impoverished the revelation which the Sage drew from lingering in the regions where death reigns. He welcomed sovereignty as a weight, which he let go . . .

Do I intend to minimize Hegel's attitude? But the contrary is true! I want to show the incomparable scope of his approach. To that end I cannot veil the very minimal (and even inevitable) part of failure.

To my mind, it is rather the exceptional certainty of that approach which is brought out in my associations. If he failed, one cannot say that it was the result of an error. The meaning of the failure itself differs from that of the failure which caused it: the error alone is perhaps fortuitous. In general, it is as an authentic movement, weighty with sense, that one must speak of the "failure" of Hegel.

Indeed, man is always in pursuit of an authentic sovereignty. That sovereignty, apparently, was, in a certain sense, originally his, but doubtless that could not then have been in a *conscious* manner, and so in a sense it was not his, it escaped him. We shall see that in a

number of ways he continued to pursue what forever eluded him. The essential thing is that one cannot attain it consciously and seek it, because seeking distances it. And yet I can believe that nothing is given us that is not given in that equivocal manner.

Translated by Jonathan Strauss